

## Community resources

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*courage is contagious*

## Viewing cable 06DAMASCUS1186, REGIME SENSES SYRIA POLICY AT IMPASSE

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#06DAMASCUS1186**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06DAMASCUS1186	2006-03-19 13:24	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7765  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0702

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001186

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SUBJECT: REGIME SENSES SYRIA POLICY AT IMPASSE

REF: DAMASCUS 1158

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

1. (C) Summary: In separate meetings with Syria desk officer March 13, two key contacts noted that the SARG believes that U.S. policy towards Syria has reached an impasse, and that the U.S. is in the process of changing its approach. That shift will take six months, in their view, during which the regime will likely continue to crack down hard on any internal opposition and maintain its confrontational posture regionally in ways likely to exacerbate anti-American sentiment. Both XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX, mavericks with assorted, sometimes combative, ties to leadership figures, described the regime as confident and relaxed. XXXXXXXXXXXX criticized U.S. policy towards Syria and the region, noting that instead of isolating the Islamists, the U.S. has created conditions that have united Islamist nationalists and secular Arab nationalists. On other issues, XXXXXXXXXXXX claimed the regime may be considering an opening to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and described a new think tank he will head. End Summary.

2. (C) CONTACTS SEE U.S. POLICY SHIFT COMING: XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX told visiting Syria desk officer and Emboffs that they believe the U.S. policy shift has already begun. In coming months, they expect the U.S. to abandon its Syria policy of "no carrots/only demands," as well as its larger regional policy of trying to roll back Arab nationalism by establishing a pro-U.S. regime in Iraq. During this period, the regime will feel free to crack down internally and will flex its muscles regionally to demonstrate its confidence. In this "vacuum between U.S. policies," the SARG will seek to set in place a variety of anti-American currents. Both men pointed to an emboldened regime that, in XXXXXXXXXXXX's words, "can burn down European embassies," close the EU-sponsored human rights center, and then welcome Spanish FM Moratinos to Syria. XXXXXXXXXXXX also pointed to the widely publicized "new redlines" (reftel) as a troubling sign that the regime is planning for a repressive period with no reforms.

3. (C) REGIME SEEN AS CONFIDENT, RELAXED: XXXXXXXXXXXX described the regime as very confident and relaxed, as it savors what it feels is a string of triumphs: Hamas' electoral victory; rising influence in Lebanon (for example among the Sunnis in the Sidon area, where he asserted that Sa'ad Hariri's influence was waning); containing Brammertz and the UNIIIC investigation; and successful diplomatic efforts with the Saudis and Egyptians. On the Hamas victory, XXXXXXXXXXXX elaborated that Syria will not play a major direct role but will stay "in the shadows," seeking to benefit from the rising Islamist influence in the territories and the downfall of its nemesis, the Fatah-supported PA.

4. (C) U.S. POLICY CRITICIZED AS SELF-DEFEATING: Speaking more critically of U.S. foreign policy than he has in the past, XXXXXXXXXXXX expressed disappointment that the U.S. has driven Syria in a direction not good for the country, but very good for the regime. The regime senses that the U.S. has played its hand very badly, using its war on terror in a counterproductive way. Instead of isolating the Islamists and creating the kind of dynamic social ferment and gradual upheaval that was evident in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the mid- and late-1980's, the U.S. has created conditions that have united, in Syria at least, Islamist nationalists and secular Arab nationalists. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, the U.S. has succeeded in making Syria a hero in the Islamic world. U.S. support for the opposition has not been effective. The fact that Ba'ath Party thugs, with some security services support, could beat up a group of opposition activists, intellectuals, and cultural figures peacefully protesting the continuation of Emergency Law was a far more important signal than the USD five million that the U.S. set aside to support the opposition, noted XXXXXXXXXXXX.

5. (C) A REGIME OPENING TO THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD? Touching on other subjects, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that the imposition of Section 311 sanctions is having no impact and they are not being taken seriously. He said the regime is wagering "at much higher levels," placing strategic bets on Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran. On a much more speculative note, he said he had picked up signals that the regime may be

considering an opening to the Muslim Brotherhood, as a way to transform a potential threat to the regime into a tool to shore it up and encourage greater anti-Americanism. XXXXXXXXXXXX reported that emissaries from the MB came to Damascus from London a few weeks ago, including a relative of MB leader-in-exile Bayanouni. XXXXXXXXXXXX reiterated that U.S. policies had created ripe conditions for such an opening. XXXXXXXXXXXX claimed that some consideration was being given to canceling Law 49, the provision making membership in the MB a capital offense. (Comment: While we have heard occasional reports of such a SARG initiative in the past, they have not proceeded very far, primarily because of deep-seated regime hostility to what it views as its most serious potential threat.) On a related note, XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that the regime, with its carefully modulated policies supporting Hamas, PIJ, and Sunni groups in Iraq, as well as Hizballah in Lebanon, has made sure that the Islamists in Syria "have no case" to make against the regime.

16. (C) A NEW THINK TANK AND MU'ALLIM'S PROSPECTS: XXXXXXXXXXXX noted that he has launched a new think tank that will include "all political currents in Syria." He described FM (then Deputy FM) Walid Mu'allim as the driving force behind the center. In previous conversations, XXXXXXXXXXXX characterized the project as designed to counter some of the hard-line advice being provided to the President by Hisham Ikhtiyar and a center he launched while head of the General Intelligence Directorate (and apparently continues to oversee). On a related note, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that Bashar al-Asad has become much more ideological and less pragmatic in orientation. Regarding XXXXXXXXXXXX mentor Mu'allim's promotion to Foreign Minister, XXXXXXXXXXXX expressed doubt that it would have much impact on policy. While Mu'allim is savvy enough to get control over the MFA bureaucracy relatively soon, he "will be sandwiched in by the two Hourani spies," VP Farouk a-Shara'a and DFM Faisal Mikdad. More importantly, the MFA has never been in charge of key policies, primarily the purview of the security services. XXXXXXXXXXXX noted the particularly important role that Mohammed Nassif Khairbek had played in the past over policies involving Hamas, Hizballah, Lebanon, and Iran, often shored up by the selective use of money, corrupt influence, and violence. XXXXXXXXXXXX offered a very ambivalent view of Nassif's current status, claiming he still wielded influence but suffered from occasional bouts of "dementia."

17. (C) Comment: Both XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX are secular intellectuals with ties of various shadings with the regime. Both have consistently spoken to us about the need for U.S. engagement with the SARG. XXXXXXXXXXXX exceptionally critical view of U.S. foreign policy is new and likely represents a reaction to the success of hard-line Syrian policies that he and his friend Mu'allim have consistently struggled to counter over the past several years. The increasing sharpness in tone may reflect his frustration that his views have fallen into disfavor for the time being and that hard-line advocates seem to be crowing that their views are paying big dividends for Syria. XXXXXXXXXXXX most salient point is that those hard-line policies could pay dividends for the regime and still lead Syria down a dead-end path of no reform, no engagement with the West, and increasingly dangerous engagement with Islamist political currents likely to erode further Syria's embattled secular identity. End Comment.

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